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ABSTRACT

Student involvement theory defines student involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience. Research on student involvement conducted at community colleges and universities has shown that the quality of time spent was a more important factor in explaining student achievement than sheer amount of time spent. Another important feature of student involvement theory is the concept of education as a partnership between the institution and the student, with both expected to fulfill their respective responsibilities. The challenge facing community college educators is to design policies and practices that will encourage students to invest their time and effort in learning activities. This is particularly difficult given the myriad demands on most community college students' time. Strategies for increasing student involvement in learning include the following: (1) alter features of the teaching-learning process to yield more active participation; (2) design learning technologies to increase the amount of time that students are actively engaged in the learning process; (3) increase student contacts with faculty and other students through class restructuring, faculty advising, and student teaching and research assistantships; and (4) increase student participation in out-of-class learning activities by linking those activities to specific course assignments. Student involvement theory can also be incorporated into faculty hiring and faculty evaluation procedures, as well as orientation, advisement, and counseling programs for students. By implementing strategies such as these, a college can improve the likelihood of student success without the need to invest additional resources. (JMC)

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Achieving Student Success Through Student Involvement

Jack Friedlander and Peter MacDougall

Objectives of the Article

The purpose of this article is to: (1) highlight research findings on the relationship between student involvement and achievement in college; (2) provide a brief description of student involvement theory; (3) cite examples of how community colleges can apply this theory to influence student learning and development; and, (4) advance a rationale for incorporating student involvement theory into an institution's policies and practices.

Student Involvement and Achievement

An extensive body of evidence accumulated over the past two decades demonstrates the strong relationship between student involvement and student achievement. The studies show that the more time and effort students invest in their course work, the greater will be their personal growth and academic achievement, their satisfaction with college, and their persistence in college (National Institute of Education, 1984; Astin, 1985).

Studies conducted at over 200 colleges and universities (Pace, 1989) and at Santa Barbara City College (Friedlander, 1990) showed that there were substantial differences among students in their level of involvement in taking advantage of the opportunities available for learning in the college setting. The greater the level of student involvement, the greater the degree of progress students felt they had made toward achieving related educational objectives. For example:

- The greater the use of the library as a resource and research tool, the greater the progress students reported making toward developing the ability to learn on their own, pursue ideas, and find information they needed (independent inquiry skills).

- The greater the time and effort students devoted to writing, the greater the progress they reported making in learning how to write clearly and effectively.

- The greater the breadth of contacts students had with students who differed from them in terms of age, ethnicity, philosophy of life, political and religious beliefs, and nationality, the greater the progress they reported making toward: (1) becoming aware of different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life; and (2) understanding other people and the ability to get along with different kinds of people.

An important finding of these studies was that the amount and quality of participation in learning activities was a more important determinant of student achievement in college than such factors as age, ethnicity, family income, number of hours employed, high school grade-point average, and marital status (Friedlander, 1980; Pace, 1982; Pace, 1984; Friedlander, 1990). These findings led Pace (1982) to conclude that "...granted the importance of all the elements that influence who goes where to college, once the student gets there what counts most is not who they are or where they are but what they do (p. 18)." This conclusion, based on studies of students attending the full spectrum of colleges and universities (select liberal arts colleges to community colleges), is very powerful. It demonstrates that what students get out of college will depend, to a considerable degree, on the extent to which they take advantage of the opportunities that are provided in the college setting.

Student Involvement Theory

Student Involvement Defined. Astin (1985) defines student involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. A highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, discusses the subject matter with friends, thinks about how some of the ideas presented in class relate to other subjects and to his or her own life, reads related but not necessarily required materials, participates in campus activities, and interacts frequently with faculty and other students. Conversely, an uninvolved student may spend little time on their studies, doesn't discuss the course material with classmates or friends, waits to the last minute to prepare required assignments, spends little time on campus, and has few contacts with faculty to discuss course and college-related matters.

Time on Task vs. Quality of Time Spent. Research studies conducted at community colleges and universities (Friedlander, 1980; Pace, 1984; Friedlander, 1990) show that the quality of time spent is a more important factor in explaining student achievement on related outcome measures than sheer amount of time spent. To illustrate, students who spent 30 hours a week on academic course work had higher grades and reported making greater progress toward objectives related to general education and intellectual competencies than students who devoted 20 hours a week to their academic course work. However, students who spent about 20 hours a week on activities which required a high degree of initiative and effort received higher grades and made more progress toward achieving academic related outcomes than did students who spent 30 hours a week on activities which required less initiative and quality of effort (e.g., using the library as a research tool versus using it primarily as a quiet place to study).

Student-college Partnership. Another important feature of student involvement theory is the concept of education being a partnership between the institution and the student. This partnership calls upon the student and the institution to fulfill their respective responsibilities. For example, Pace (1984) stated that Colleges are accountable for the resources and facilities, the programs and procedures, and the stimuli and standards they provide for promoting student learning and development. Students are accountable for the amount, breadth, and quality of effort they invest in their own learning and development, and specifically, in using the facilities and opportunities that are available in the college setting. Accountability for achievement and related outcomes must consider both what the college offers and what the student does with those offerings.

Challenge for Increasing Student Involvement

The challenge facing community college educators is to design policies and practices that will encourage students to invest their time and effort in desired learning activities. This is no small order given the multiple demands that are competing with educators for a share of the student's finite time and energy. The majority of students attend community colleges under conditions that make the amount and quality of time they invest in learning activities difficult. Nearly all community college students commute to campus, close to two-thirds attend college on a part-time basis, many have family responsibilities competing for their time, over 75 percent hold jobs while attending classes with most working at off-campus locations. These are circumstances that tend to make the learning experience less central to their lives and ones that have been found to detract from student involvement and persistence in college (Astin, 1985). Community college administrators and faculty need to devise a variety of policies and practices to increase student involvement in desired learning activities which take into account the realities of a student population trying to balance numerous demands on their time and energy.

Strategies for Increasing Student Involvement in Course-Related Activities

Increasing Student Involvement in Course Activities. Colleges clearly can control the conditions of active learning by expecting students to become participants in rather than spectators of the learning process. Many features of the teaching-learning process can be altered to yield greater student involvement. Students learn more when they are actively engaged in the learning process. Colleges should encourage faculty to seek innovations that get students more involved in active learning activities.

Numerous institutions are encouraging their faculty to participate in classroom research projects designed to try out instructional strategies for increasing student involvement in desired learning activities. Faculty are implementing and assessing the effectiveness of various strategies for encouraging students to take more responsibility for their learning. Many of the techniques used are adapted from The Handbook on Classroom Research Techniques, written by Patricia Cross and Thomas Angelo (1988).

A specific program idea implemented by a college's ESL and Spanish Departments illustrates how faculty can arrange their courses to increase student active participation in desired learning activities. Several times during the semester, students in the ESL classes are paired with those in the Spanish classes that meet during the same time period. In the first half of the class period, the students in the Spanish class are asked to invite, in Spanish, the students in the ESL class to a movie. The vocabulary and grammar needed to accomplish this task requires students to integrate and apply what they have been studying in class. Half way through the class period, the students reverse roles and the ESL students are asked to use the English that they have been learning to invite the American students to the movies. In addition to increasing student learning and interest in acquiring the language, this project has resulted in having students in each of these classes extend their learning of the language outside of class through such self-initiated activities as cross-tutoring, joint parties in which they shared cultural traditions, and attending college activities together. According to the students and the faculty, the interactions with students who speak the language they are attempting to acquire proved to be an extremely effective method of increasing student interest in and learning of the language. The design of these instructional experiences also increased the likelihood that students would use the language they were learning outside of class and that they would have meaningful interactions with students whose backgrounds were very different from their own.

Uses of Technology for Increasing Student Involvement. Learning technologies should be designed to increase, and not reduce, the amount of time that students are actively engaged in the learning process and the amount of personal contact between students and other members of the class (N.I.E., 1984). Studies conducted at a community college on the effectiveness of video disc programs in music appreciation and history showed that students had better short-term and long-term learning of the material when they were asked to respond to questions that were embedded into the video disc than when they were asked to view the video disc without having to respond to the questions (Ullom, 1989). Studies on the uses of video disc technologies conducted at Harvard (Light, 1990) and at Santa Barbara City College (Ullom, 1989) showed that students both learn more in pairs and prefer working that way compared to working alone with this instructional

technology. These findings illustrate the influence faculty can have increasing the benefits of instructional technology by designing learning experiences that will increase the likelihood that students will be actively involved in course learning activities.

Increasing Student Contacts with Faculty and Other Students. Research studies have consistently shown that the greater the interactions students have with their instructors, the greater will be their personal growth, their satisfaction with college, and their persistence in college (Astin, 1985). Studies have also shown that half of the students attending community colleges and four-year institutions had not met with a faculty member outside of class, and many have had only minimal individual contacts with their instructors (Pace, 1989; Baird, 1990; Friedlander, 1990).

In a commuter campus, many students often do not have time or are not willing to take the initiative to talk to their instructors during office hours. In addition, many students , especially those who attend classes part-time and in the evening, don't have much opportunity to interact with other students outside of class.

The fact that for a significant number of students, limited faculty contact is occurring, may have serious consequences for students' success. Astin states: "frequent interaction with faculty members is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or indeed any other student or institutional characteristic" (Astin, 1985; p. 149). As teaching institutions, community colleges must capitalize on the vehicles of classroom teaching, and student support services to achieve the benefits that result from involvement of students with faculty and staff.

There are a number of steps colleges can take to increase the degree of interaction between students and faculty. For example, an approach emphasized in classroom-based research (Cross & Angelo, 1988) is to restructure classes to allow for greater student-faculty and student-student interactions. This includes introducing activities in class to allow for greater student-faculty and student-student contacts. For example, dividing a class into small groups to work on a common problem will enable the instructor to have greater contact with the students by interacting and observing each of the small groups. Having students work in small groups on course-related projects will also increase the level of student-student exchange of information both in class and out of class.

Faculty Advising. A faculty advising program can be introduced to increase the frequency and depth of out-of-class contacts between students and faculty in their major field of study. An

evaluation of such a program (Friedlander, 1990) showed that students met with their faculty adviser an average of four times a year; 97 percent of the advisers would encourage other students to meet with a faculty adviser; and 13 percent of the students included in the evaluation study noted that the conference that they had with their faculty adviser significantly influenced their decision to remain in college.

Student Teaching and Research Assistantships. Astin (1985) has found that holding a job on campus was positively related to the degree of student involvement in learning activities and satisfaction with college. However, most community college students work off-campus which Astin found to be negatively associated with college involvement and persistence.

A viable strategy for increasing student-faculty and student-student contacts is to create on-campus jobs related to the student's field of interest. Two such positions that colleges should consider establishing are student teaching and student research assistantships. In addition to providing faculty assistance with their courses and professional pursuits, these on-campus jobs would provide students with excellent opportunities to become actively involved with faculty and other students in their major field of study.

Increasing Student Involvement in Out-of-Class Activities

An effective approach for increasing student participation in out-of-class learning activities is to link those activities to specific courses. This is particularly true for commuter campuses. The following strategies implemented at a community college illustrate how this concept can be applied.

An important objective of college is to increase student interest and appreciation of the arts. This is particularly important in that a large percentage of students do not attend a live theater performance or visit an art exhibit while in college (Baird, 1990; Friedlander, 1990). To increase the likelihood that students would be exposed to theater, faculty members from English and Theater Arts Departments devised the idea of having English 1 classes (college-level reading and composition) study a play that the Theater Arts Department would be performing that semester. Students in the English 1 classes discussed the play with the director and the cast from the Theater Arts Department, attended a performance of the production in the college's theater, and participated in a post-play discussion. This interdepartmental project, in place for three years, has resulted in having over a thousand students being exposed to the theater who may not have otherwise done so. This exposure to theater via this classroom-based project, has resulted in increased student participation in subsequent college-sponsored plays.

The same college linked out-of-class activities to specific courses and this resulted in dramatic increases in student and faculty attendance in such campus-based events as the college's Noon-Hour Lecture Series, the Political Science Club's Candidates Forum, the EOPS Club's Cinco de Mayo activities, and the Earth Science Club's Earth Day activities. Students and staff organizing these events asked faculty teaching courses related to the activities to tie the extracurricular activity into their classes. Many faculty cooperated by assigning students projects that required them to attend the out-of-class activity.

For example, students in the philosophy classes were required to write a critique of the presentations made by the speakers participating in the Noon-Hour Lecture Series. The students were asked to identify the presenter's thesis, how it was supported, and how much they were persuaded by the arguments presented. Students who could not attend the live lecture were asked to view a videotape of the event. The faculty in the philosophy department were able to use a Noon-Hour Lecture series as a means to teach students how to critically evaluate a lecture. Linking course-related assignments to this extracurricular activity resulted in exposing hundreds of students to the enjoyment of attending public lectures as well as teaching them how to be active listeners who critically evaluate the information an authority in the subject area is presenting.

Incorporating Student Involvement Theory Into College Policies and Practices

Astin (1985) contends that virtually every administrative and faculty policy and practice can affect how students spend their time and how much effort they devote to academic pursuits. Using student involvement theory to guide the formulation of college practices can have a profound affect on student academic achievement, personal development, and college persistence.

Faculty Hiring and Evaluation. Student involvement theory can be incorporated into faculty hiring and faculty evaluation procedures by including questions on the applicant's use of instructional strategies designed to promote student involvement and by incorporating into the faculty evaluation process assessments of the extent to which students engaged in desired learning activities. An institution's staff development program would encourage academic and student services staff to devise strategies for fostering student involvement.

Student Services. An institution guided by student involvement theory could establish a general goal for its student services programs of increasing student involvement in goal setting and academic planning activities. Orientation, advisement, and counseling programs would call for students to be active participants rather than passive recipients of information provided by college

staff. For example, students would be responsible for directed preliminary work before and after sessions with counselors and other staff members. Orientation to college sessions could require students to apply the information they receive to situations they are likely to encounter.

Conclusion

The strong relationship between student involvement and achievement, persistence, and satisfaction with college is firmly established. The amount and quality of effort invested by students in taking advantage of the opportunities in the college setting has been found to be a much more important factor in explaining achievement than student background characteristics and type of college attended. On the surface, such findings are obvious. Less obvious are the steps college educators can take to influence the extent to which students will participate in activities that will contribute a great deal to their learning and development. The theory of student involvement and examples of how it has been applied have been presented as a means by which community college practitioners can increase the odds of students succeeding in college. Applying this theory does not require colleges to invest additional resources. As Baird has poignantly stated, "It is not the *presence* of facilities, funding, and staff, but the uses to which they are put that is critical" (Baird, 1990).

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